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RUCNFB/FBI WASHDC  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000530

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DEPT FOR AF/W, PRM FOR CAROL-ANNE CHANG, GHANA FOR REFCOORD  
NATE BLUHM, ABIDJAN FOR REFCOORD NICHOLAS HILGERT

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LIBERIAN REFUGEES VOICE COMPLAINTS AT UNHCR WORLD

REFUGEE DAY EVENT

REF: SECSTATE 496

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Summary  
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¶1. The June 12 riot at UNHCR offices in Freetown was addressed by several panelists at the World Refugee Day event on June 20. GoSL officials condemned the action and chastised supporters of the urban refugees that led the riot. An urban refugee representative responded to these comments with a list of unanswered refugee complaints, which he said instigated the riot. A UNHCR representative denied the accusations, claiming refugees were mainly upset because they would not be resettled to the U.S. Changes in UNHCR's strategy for addressing refugee complaints may prevent further violence directed at UNHCR or resettlement officials. End Summary.

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UNHCR Riot Discussed at World Refugee Day Event  
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¶2. On June 20, POL Intern attended the World Refugee program organized by UNHCR in the provincial capital of Kenema. Approximately 350 people attended the event, including representatives from the GoSL, National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA, the Sierra Leone agency designed to implement UNHCR-funded activities), UNHCR, UNIOSIL, WFP, NGO implementing partners, and Liberian refugees.

¶3. In his opening address, NaCSA official Abdul Sheriff affirmed the GoSL commitment to refugee assistance. He told refugees that they would continue to be welcome and asserted that refugee protection was an essential element of the Mano River Union. Sheriff went on to admonish those refugee "upstarts" who were involved in the June 12 riot at UNHCR offices in Freetown (see reftel). He said that refugee status will be revoked for anyone found guilty of criminal activity. Sheriff urged refugees to address their concerns through the proper legal channels and avoid any further public disruption.

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Liberian Refugees Continue to Voice Frustrations  
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¶4. Bo Urban Refugee Representative David Gwen voiced his disapproval of the June 12 riot, but added that the riots

were the result of many months of unanswered refugee complaints. He said that refugees are frustrated that UNHCR stopped funding secondary education and that several refugees died while awaiting third country resettlements for medical purposes. Gwen demanded UNHCR improve efforts to identify unregistered refugees and offer assistance for their repatriation. Finally, he claimed to have proof that refugee documents had gone missing from the Kenema camp and that resettlement documents have been altered or stolen. (See reftel)

¶15. After Gwen's speech, Sheriff chastised him for criticizing UNHCR and the Sierra Leone Government, which Sheriff said had consistently offered their support. Sheriff said that any person involved in the attacks on the UNHCR office would be found, arrested, and prosecuted.

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UNHCR Representative Attributes  
Unrest to Resettlement Rejections  
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¶16. On June 27, POL Intern spoke with UNHCR Deputy Representative Abid Mir to clarify Gwen's accusations. Mir had no knowledge of refugee deaths occurring after medical resettlement was approved. He also knew nothing of missing or altered refugee documents. Mir said that most of the refugees are waiting for resettlement to the U.S., and when resettlement is denied refugees often become disgruntled. According to Mir, a recent report stating U.S. resettlement of Liberian refugees would end in September 2006 was widely circulated in camps and upset many of the refugees. (Note: PolOff forwarded PRM-approved fact sheets on Liberian resettlement policy to UNHCR and PAO, who will respond as

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necessary. End Note.)

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Comment  
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¶17. It was clear that Gwen addressed concerns shared by many refugees. Whether or not these accusations have merit, the perception amongst refugees is that they have been defrauded by UNHCR representatives, a sentiment that has had a violent repercussion in recent weeks. A number of people arrested in connection with the riot are not registered refugees and are unable to benefit from resettlement. Some measure of resentment will be unavoidable among Liberians whose hopes to settle in the U.S. will remain unfulfilled. On the other hand, it would behoove UNHCR officials to be more responsive and transparent with accusations of fraudulent resettlement claims. End Comment.

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